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STATE FOR NEA/FO (WELCH, GRAY) AND NEA/MAG (HOPKINS, HARRIS)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/27/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAL](#) [LE](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT BEN ALI TO ATTEND ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT

REF: A. TUNIS 194

[1](#)B. TUNIS 193

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) On March 27, Tunis Africa Press (TAP) agency carried an official announcement that President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali will attend the Arab League Summit in Syria on March 29 - [1](#)30. The announcement represents a turnaround from earlier statements by President Ben Ali and Foreign Minister Abdelwahab Abdallah in meetings with A/S Welch on February 28 (Reftels). During his meeting with A/S Welch, President Ben Ali stated that there was "no reason" for an Arab League Summit in Damascus without a Lebanese president and that he would not attend the summit.

[1](#)2. (C) When the Ambassador asked Special Adviser to the President and Spokesman Abdelaziz Ben Dhia about the genesis of the decision to attend, Ben Dhia replied that he had no further information to provide as he was currently traveling outside Tunis. Similarly, Mahmood Khemiri, the Minister of Foreign Affairs' Chief of Staff would only confirm the accuracy of the announcement.

[1](#)3. (C) The Ambassador spoke with MFA Secretary of State for European Affairs Hatem Ben Salem who also confirmed that President Ben Ali will attend the summit, accompanied by FM Abdallah. When asked about the reason for the change, Ben Salem said that he was not aware of the reason for the decision and would be happy to pass along any message from the United States. The Ambassador stressed that the United States believes that now is not the moment for an AL Summit in Syria given Syria's continued role in Lebanon's political stalemate and other behavior in the region.

[1](#)4. (U) The TAP agency release is as follows:

BEGIN TEXT OF OFFICIAL TAP TRANSLATION:

President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali is to visit to Syria to take part in the works of the Arab Summit's 20th session, due to be held on March 29 - 30 in Damascus, announces the official spokesman for the Presidency of the Republic.

END TEXT.

[1](#)5. (S) COMMENT: It is unclear why President Ben Ali has changed his mind and decided to attend the AL Summit, something he almost never does. While only speculation on our part, one reason might be the Palestinian situation and the possibility of a Tunisian role to resolve the Fatah-Hamas split. END COMMENT.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>
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